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SCOTLAND AND THE VIKING MENACE

*Stephen T. Driscoll**

Paradoxically one of the major obstacles to debate at the Public Archaeology Workshop was that it was too heavily attended, too many people wished to give papers. This popularity tended to limit discussion and also made it difficult to raise issues that were not addressed adequately by the formal presentations. From my perspective as organiser the major gap in the proceedings was the failure of most speakers to acknowledge the general theoretical issues concerning the creation of archaeology knowledge and its propagation to the public. This failure was widespread: the workshop invitation which was circulated to the Scottish archaeological community outlined three broad areas for discussion: 1) contact with the public which takes place 'on-site' (i.e. in the field, at excavations or at monuments), 2) contact which occurs 'off-site' (i.e. in museums, in school, through the media etc.) and 3) the theoretical and ideological aspects of the relationship between archaeologists and the public. Only two persons indicated any interest in the third topic in their responses to the invitation. As a result that section was scrapped and they were accommodated (somewhat awkwardly) elsewhere in the programme. Silences are often as revealing as announcements; it seems significant that the philosophy behind Public Archaeology was not generally considered worth specific attention by the vast majority of archaeologists in Scotland. Although an avoidance of archaeological theory seems almost endemic in Scotland, it was none the less startling to see how little interest there was in discussing what should be fundamental to the goals and intentions behind the practice of Public Archaeology. In this paper I would like to redress this imbalance a little and suggest why a sound philosophical approach is necessary for the successful development of Public Archaeology.

The lack of specific references to theory does not amount to its absence. A philosophy or theory can be recognised, even though it was not articulated, through the practices it governs. Precisely because the question, 'What is Public Archaeology?' was never posed (even rhetorically) and because there was so little introspection about the motives and goals, we must conclude that the purpose of Public Archaeology is regarded as self-evident or apparent to most of those concerned with it. The philosophy embedded in the taken-for-granted assumptions about Public Archaeology must be extracted from the straight-forward statements about the mechanics of dealing with the public. At the workshop several areas of broad agreement were evident and these can be said to represent a consensus or shared approach to Public Archaeology. This constitutes a philosophy. At one level there exists a sincere interest in the subject, which is manifest as an enthusiasm for informing others about the past. In essence this is an educational motivation: we think knowledge about the past is interesting, valuable and worthy of propagation. Another, equally central aspect of this contemporary philosophy rests on the relatively new belief that archaeological information has a market value (especially in 'on-site' situations) and is therefore concerned with the marketing and consumption of

**Dept. of Archaeology, The University, Glasgow G12 8QQ*

archaeological information to an interested public. It is this second aspect that I would like to consider, because it is this new belief which is shaping the development of contemporary archaeological practice.

Obviously this commercial trend is to some extent a product of the current political and economic climate, but in addition there are specific events which have encouraged these new moves in archaeology. Perhaps the most significant single event has been the opening of the Jorvik Viking Centre as an enterprise designed to introduce a wide audience to the archaeological findings at Coppergate, and to make money. It is its success at attracting a fee paying public which has elevated Jorvik into the ideal of what public archaeology can become. In its first four years the centre has attracted, on average, three thousand visitors a day (M. Niece *pers. comm.*). In this remarkable case publicity and popularisation have directly yielded a rich financial harvest. I think it is an open question whether in most instances elsewhere publicity and media exposure will translate directly into cash, none the less such a notion of Public Archaeology, as primarily a strategy for securing financial support – whether from public or private sources – is central to the philosophical position I have identified. Obviously Jorvik is not the only instance in archaeology of the larger trend which has been described as the Heritage Industry (Hewison 1987), but it is certainly the most well-known and successful of the archaeological ventures and is indeed noteworthy within the general context of Heritage Industries.

The importance of the 'Jorvik effect' can be judged by the increasing amounts of time and energy which are now being expended at most levels of British archaeology on giving other projects that slick touch and, more importantly, the managerial organisation, needed to turn a profit. It is for this reason that Jorvik is relevant for Scottish archaeology. The Jorvik effect can be analysed in two ways; first, by examining its managerial and marketing achievements, secondly in terms of the content of the Jorvik experience. Here I will focus on the second aspects. Consideration of the content of the displays seems a more pressing concern than assessing the development of a middle management in archaeology, especially since the staggering profitability of Jorvik has protected it, with one exception (Shanks and Tilley 1987), from all but the most trivial of criticisms. These are of the sort we have all heard, such as 'I don't think the smells worked' or 'I didn't enjoy having Magnus Magnusson breathing down my neck'. The intentions behind the displays and the success of the displays, in terms other than financial, have not been seriously questioned. Given that Jorvik is being adopted as a model of how archaeology is to present itself in the future, and given that the presentation of archaeology is being increasingly linked with the funding of continuing archaeological research, this is a serious oversight. Before the Jorvik model (i.e. profit linked scientism) can be regarded as appropriate Public Archaeology, we have to ask whether it presents the sort of archaeology we want, and only then whether it has any applicability outside already established tourism centres.

The creators of the Viking Centre describe their project as an experiment (Addyman and Gayner 1984), clearly a successful one, but none the less incomplete and in a state of development. Given that they do not regard it as the last word on archaeological presentation, there is no reason why we should not give it close scrutiny to see how it may be improved upon.

Probably the easiest way to conduct a critical analysis is to consider the organisation and layout of the exhibition as if we were taking the tour. Firstly, having paid your money, and while waiting for time car, the visitor enters an 'orientation channel' and is confronted with lurid displays of the genre made familiar by B-movie posters. The posters begin by reiterating some of the most widespread preconceptions about the Vikings: they came from the sea, they were pirates notorious for their acts of violence.

The tone of the posters then shifts, they note that Vikings were also traders and farmers who settled and contributed to shaping Britain. These two opposing images of the violent outlaw and the good citizen are left unresolved, presumably to let the archaeological facts resolve the contradiction. The tour really begins upon entering the time car, which takes the visitor backwards through a thousand years of York's history. This serves to situate the reconstruction firmly within time and place: it emphasises the unbroken history of life in York, in Coppergate, which stretches back to Viking times. The implication is that the link between the past and present is direct, strong and unambiguous. The notion that any knowledge of the past is present knowledge is side-stepped as is any discussion of what came before. Soon the time car arrives in Jorvik itself, where rows of reconstructed houses crowd a narrow lane just as they did in that very spot a thousand years ago. There is no question that the attention to detail is terrific, the houses look used and lived in, objects lie about as though just set down for a moment, and the street is populated by models of Viking inhabitants going about their daily activities and pets are everywhere one looks.

Although all of the details can be substantiated by the archaeological record, several areas of criticism on points of interpretation are immediately opened up by the displays. This is inevitable; once one begins to reconstruct a society in such detail and draw upon social theory choices must be made about how to treat topics like gender, ethnicity, work and leisure. Conscious or not, such decisions are made. The key thing to note is that while the display effectively gives the visitor the impression of having come face to face with the past, nowhere is it acknowledged that such decisions have taken place. This is perhaps to be expected from a snapshot, which is what this frozen moment of the past strongly evokes. Snapshots are an anonymous art form. It is this lack of authorship (noted by Shanks and Tilley 1987) that is responsible for the major failing of the display: the lack of historicity. No details about Anglo-Saxon York are given, Viking society appears to have grown from nothing (come from the sea). It so happens that at the time of designing the display little was known about the archaeology of Anglo-Saxon York, but the problem with giving the displayed society a history of its own is not that it would have been speculative. The problem is that it would have demanded some account of historical development and change, which would have revealed the inadequacy of presenting the past as a single snapshot.

There are further stages in the journey. At the end of the lane, the time car springs forward to the excavations of the late 1970s and takes the visitor through the Viking Dig, past ruined houses and features in the process of being excavated, thus exposing the character of the evidence upon which the reconstructions were based and simultaneously stressing the authenticity of the reconstruction – the pathetic wattle walls are real! Scientific precision and authenticity are the keynotes here: the archaeologist models are surveying; little of the subjective art of digging is shown or discussed. Before the time car halts and the visitor passes through a site-hut, authentic in its grime and as detailed in its reconstruction as are the tenth century houses. Under the dirt the orderliness that is modern excavation is evident. From the site-hut the visitor disembarks into a laboratory, where science is again confronted; this time in the unambiguous guise of microscopes and white lab-coated technicians engaged in conversation and environmental analysis. From here the visitor proceeds to the museum where the real artefacts are presented in their appropriate place – a traditional museum.

The important point is that the transition between the reconstruction and the waterlogged buildings and rubbish is mediated by science as exemplified by careful, systematic recording, analysis and presentation. The portrayal of the practice of archaeology, which is used to validate the reconstruction is the scientific laboratory, not the drawing office, library, word processor or setting where the observations are

transferred to the real medium of archaeology – the printed word. A safe choice (beyond reproach) but a selective, not to say incomplete, representation of archaeological practice.

The visitor's last stop is the museum. Here are presented the finds, which are described and categorised, and thus made to testify to the diligence and logic at the heart of archaeology. The process by which the conclusions, proclaimed in the displays, are arrived at is not discussed. The displays, thus, at once support the reconstruction and mystify it. The museum, lacking human figures, holds the visitor's attention less well than do the other displays, especially by comparison to the displays in the shop which leads off from the museum and which being visible from the museum might even be regarded as part of it. The museum and shop are intimately connected: it is the only part of the centre where the visitor moves freely back and forth. The shop allows the visitor to acquire reproductions of the objects which have just been encountered. It is impossible to escape the feeling that the museum cases act as the show cases for the goods in the shop. Thus a link (perhaps inadvertent) is established between the productive activities of those Viking entrepreneurs and the commercial activities of their descendants.

The problem is not simply that such interpretations as embodied in the reconstructions may be partial, biased or just plain wrong, but that the method of display works against any alternative interpretation. Because the visitor has been given none of the critical tools with which to assess the overall presentation no alternative view is in fact possible. The visitor is treated simply as a consumer of information, not a person who may be capable of thinking for themselves. The displays actively discourage any serious interpretive thinking on the visitor's part and do not encourage any deep contemplation of the relationship between the past as presented and the present. Russell Handsman (1980) has explained why reconstructions such as Jorvik present such impenetrable fronts: essentially it is because they represent the past too thoroughly. Like photographs, but to an even greater degree, they 'carry the illusion of reality, a meaning of "having-been there"', which presents a seamless surface of plausibility. Since seeing is believing, this effectively makes it immune from criticism.

The alternative would be to provide the visitor with some of the critical knowledge needed to assess the interpretive framework, and here I am not concerned with the details of dating or faunal analysis, but with the themes of continuity, commercialism, ethnicity and gender relations. It is not a question of hand wringing over the accuracy of the information in the displays, but the use to which the information is put. A presentation which puts the interpretive cards on the table might make for a less Disneyland-like museum, but it would help to demystify the interpretive process. Far from reducing the archaeologist's intellectual stature (through an erosion of exclusive knowledge) it might actually enhance it, by drawing members of the public more deeply into the thinking process.

Dave Pollock's presentation at the Public Archaeology Workshop on his own approach to reconstruction drawing was the only concrete suggestion made about how this process might be made to work in practice. His drawings deliberately show a minimum of detail, which requires the visitor both to refer back to the monument and to use his or her imagination. This effectively underscores the primary importance of the monument as an object in need of interpretation and treats the visitor as an intelligent human being capable of participating in the interpretation, neither of which Jorvik does. However, Pollock's drawings are generally seen at guardianship sites, a different and more comprehensive approach is needed for sites actively undergoing excavation and for museums. Mark Leone and his colleagues (Leone 1984; Leone *et al.* 1987) have explained how such a process can work in both circumstances. What they call critical archaeology rests on the premiss that as archaeologists, they are obliged to explain that

their archaeological practice, and hence its results, is rooted to the present. Such an awareness allows the visitor to assess the contemporary political and social influences which impinge upon their interpretation, thus providing the visitor with a more informed perspective. This allows for the possibility that the visitor can come to conclusions which are different from those of the archaeologist. Leone and his colleagues have suggested that such a programme need not be unprofitable (whether it could be as profitable as Jorvik is a moot point – probably anything in York would have made money); it also rests on research which suggests that people treat their visits to archaeological sites as entertainment precisely because they are educational, so in theory anything which can deepen that educational learning experience will be good both for the visitor and the archaeologist.

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PROFESSIONAL RESPONSES TO PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY: A COMMENT

Blaise Vyner*

'Public Archaeology, Private Meeting' announced the notice on the door; neatly encapsulating a dichotomy which was evident throughout the day's proceedings. On the one hand, there appears to be an element which seems satisfied with the current provision of public information on archaeology, on the other, a group which sees this response as inadequate. Since by all accounts 'public archaeology' is still reaching only a very few people (half-a-dozen extra-mural students, 1000 or so exhibition visitors), the doubts of either group seem, in a very real sense, academic. Archaeology is but one of many resources which are under threat; one of many which has failed to capitalise on a latent public interest. The current promotion of 'public archaeology' seems comparable with a death-bed conversion without benefit of a priest (these notes perhaps made by undertakers invited to tender for the funeral).

To turn to the actual content of the morning session; the publicity accompanying the ill-starred Elginhaugh project was revealed by Peter Yeoman in a disarmingly honest

account which suggested that the only resource which was not lacking was financial. Caroline Wickham-Jones presented a worthy picture of archaeological effort in a rural setting. It was left to Peter Hill to show something of the Right Stuff – leaflets, publicity, razzmatazz and, best of all, a realisation that public interest can generate the assistance of local and regional bodies and that this assistance must be acknowledged fulsomely if it is to be repeated.

In discussing the creation and use of the Brenig Archaeological Trail in Clwyd, North Wales, Frances Lynch drew attention to the relatively small numbers of people using the short trail and the tiny fraction walking the long route. It is important, however, to realise that in itself this does not matter, what does matter is public awareness that the trail exists, together with appreciation of its intent. Surveys have shown that the vast majority of visitors to National Parks, picnic sites and points of interest do not get out of their cars, but they still appreciate the amenity. This is perhaps all that archaeology should ask of its

*Cleveland Archaeology, P.O. Box 41, Southlands Centre, Middlesbrough TS3 0YZ